GETTING UNSTUCK

PART 1 How creative thinking can move you forward

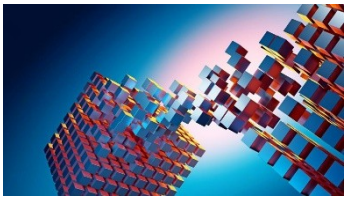
Welcome to "The McKinsey Publishing Guide to getting unstuck." In this first email, we'll explore how companies can break through stagnant thinking and drive innovation. A key approach? Cultivating a more inclusive environment. We'll share practical strategies, including fostering empathy and embracing an artistic perspective, to unlock new levels of creativity and improve performance.

While "thinking outside the box" may be a common phrase, its core message—the need for unconventional problem-solving—remains crucial. But moving beyond the cliché, how can organizations practically cultivate creativity?

Corporate leaders often have a reputation for being rigid, but McKinsey's Brooke Weddle and coauthors write that transforming workplace culture to be more inclusive can serve as a significant driver of innovation. By fostering an environment where diverse perspectives are valued and integrated, organizations can unlock a wealth of creative potential, thereby enhancing performance and productivity.

Read on to learn more about the various ways organizations can foster creative thinking through encouraging empathy, tapping into an artistic mindset, and more.

1. Prioritize building a culture of psychological safety



When people feel safe to express ideas without

fear of judgment, they are more likely to contribute innovative solutions. This creates a culture where learning from failures is valued, promoting resilience and continuous improvement in both work and personal endeavors.

Read: Five bold moves to quickly transform your organization's culture

2. Adopt an artist's mindset

Reframing challenges as creative projects allows you to approach them with a sense of curiosity and playfulness. This can lead to innovative solutions and a more fulfilling experience, whether you're tackling a complex work project or navigating a personal dilemma.

Read: Author Talks: Can thinking like an artist improve your decisions?

3. Disrupt familiar patterns

When routines become entrenched, both work and life can feel stagnant. Introducing novel experiences—whether a new hobby, a different work approach, or exploring unfamiliar environments—can stimulate fresh thinking and unlock solutions previously unseen.

Read: Sparking creativity in teams: An executive's guide

4. Cultivate empathy to unlock collaborative

By actively listening and seeking to understand others' perspectives, you can break down communication barriers and foster a more inclusive environment. This not only enhances teamwork at work but also enriches personal relationships, leading to more fulfilling interactions and a sense of shared purpose.

Read: It's cool to be kind: The value of empathy at work

PART 2

Prioritize holistic health in the workplace to unlock growth

In the previous session, we explored how companies and individuals can break through stagnant thinking and drive innovation by being more creative. In this email, we'll delve into the crucial connection between holistic well-being and the ability to escape feeling stuck. Often, we focus on external challenges, but neglecting our health—physical, mental, and spiritual—can create unseen barriers.

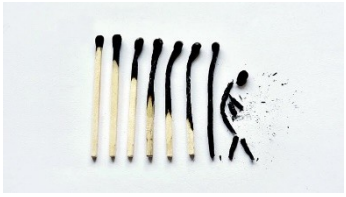
Burnout can affect anyone, but it's particularly common in high-pressure work environments. If you're personally experiencing signs of burnout, or observing them within your team, it's crucial to address this issue proactively. Consider the profound effects of prioritizing both your own and your team's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

The imperative to act extends beyond personal health. Employee disengagement and attrition, both significantly correlated with diminished well-being, can impose substantial financial burdens on organizations. According to a McKinsey Health Institute survey by Jacqueline Brassey, Barbara Jeffery, and Drew Ungerman, a median-size S&P

company could incur annual productivity losses ranging from $228 million to $355 million.

Here are five ways employees and organizations can follow a “complementary approach” to enhance employee well-being, innovation, and job performance.

1. Recognize the root cause



If you’re feeling stuck, consider if burnout might be a contributing factor. Are you chronically stressed, exhausted, or feeling detached from your work? Addressing the underlying burnout is crucial before you can effectively get unstuck.

Read: What is burnout?

2. Prioritize holistic well-being to regain momentum

Employees with good holistic health are more likely to indicate that they are innovative at work, have better work performance, and experience better work–life balance.

Read: Reframing employee health: Moving beyond burnout to holistic health

3. Connect to meaning and purpose to fuel motivation and resilience

When people feel disconnected from their work’s purpose, they can easily become demotivated and “stuck.” By fostering a sense of spiritual health, organizations can help employees rediscover their “why,” leading to renewed energy and drive.

Read: In search of self and something bigger: A spiritual health exploration

4. Reframe your perception of stress

First, determine if you're experiencing distress or eustress. Distress often feels overwhelming and uncontrollable, while eustress feels challenging but manageable. If you're experiencing distress, challenge negative thought patterns. Instead of thinking, "I can't handle this," try thinking, "This is challenging, but I can learn and grow from it."

Read: How to turn everyday stress into 'optimal stress'

5. Implement micro-breaks and stress-reduction techniques

Don't wait until you're feeling overwhelmed to take a break. Incorporate short breaks throughout the day to recharge your mental batteries. Simple techniques like deep breathing, stretching, or a brief walk can make a big difference.

Read: Author Talks: How minor stresses add up to epic fails

5. Embrace the unpredictability of the creative process

Recognizing that great ideas often emerge from unexpected places can free you from the pressure of perfection. This mindset shift empowers you to experiment, take calculated risks, and see setbacks as opportunities for learning and growth, both professionally and personally.

Read: 'The creative process is fabulously unpredictable. A great idea cannot be predicted'

PART 3

How centering purpose in the workplace fosters empowerment

In the previous session, we explored how holistic well-being can unlock pathways out of stagnation. In this email, we'll examine how centering purpose in the workplace fosters empowerment, transforming routine tasks into meaningful contributions. Just as a strong sense of personal meaning guides individual actions, a shared sense of purpose can galvanize teams and organizations.

"When people serve a bigger purpose than them, a true mission, or love something more than themselves, they do extraordinary things," says former Marine Corps captain Nate Boaz in an interview with McKinsey's Scott Blackburn.

Most employees—about 70 percent—say their sense of purpose is largely defined by work. Despite this, many find themselves uninspired by their day-to-day responsibilities. How can organizations foster a culture centered around purpose, motivating employees beyond mere financial compensation? And for individuals feeling trapped in jobs that don't resonate with their passions, what steps can they take to regain a sense of fulfillment? Keep reading to find out.

1. Define what "the good fight" means to you and align your actions with it

When you feel stuck, it's often because you've lost sight of what you're striving for. Reconnecting with your personal values and what you consider meaningful "struggle" can provide clarity and direction, helping you break free from inertia.

Read: Author Talks: Fighting the good fight

2. Rethink how you work to reconnect with your purpose

Feeling stuck can stem from how work is structured, not

3. Reflect on your values

Nine core values shape your unique life purpose. By taking time for introspection, you can identify what brings you fulfillment and use that knowledge to make choices that lead you toward a more purposeful existence, thus breaking stagnation.

Read: Do you know your life's purpose?

4. Help others find purpose, and you will find your own purpose reinvigorated

Often, we become stuck when we are focused on our own issues. By shifting the focus to helping others find meaning, we can gain new perspectives and discover a renewed sense of purpose.

Read: Help your employees find purpose—or watch them leave

5. Look for ways your work contributes to something larger than yourself

Understanding how your daily tasks contribute to a broader goal or a positive impact can re-energize your efforts and provide a sense of direction, helping you break free from the feeling of being stuck in a rut.

Read: The search for purpose at work

6. Recognize that purpose can evolve and change over time

Getting stuck can be a sign that your current purpose no longer aligns with your evolving self. Being open to re-evaluating and redefining your purpose allows you to adapt and find new avenues for fulfillment, preventing long-term stagnation.

Read: The importance of purpose: An interview with Acha Leke

PART 4

Why you shouldn’t fear failure

In our previous session, we explored how centering purpose in the workplace fosters empowerment. Today, we’ll shift our focus to the transformative power of embracing failure, a concept often counterintuitive to those striving for excellence. Just as a seed must break its shell to grow, individuals and organizations must embrace the possibility of failure to truly innovate.

Perfectionists are typically defined by their relentless pursuit of exceptional performance, a desire to impress superiors, and an inherent fear of failure. Superficially, this fear might appear to be a potent motivator, driving employees to achieve more. In reality, it can impede innovation and creative problem-solving, write McKinsey’s Laura Furstenthal, Alex Morris, and Erik Roth.

Leaders bear a critical responsibility: to cultivate a culture of psychological safety. This environment must be one where employees feel not only permitted, but actively encouraged, to voice their perspectives and engage in calculated risk-taking. By fostering this sense of security, leaders empower their teams to explore uncharted territories and ultimately arrive at their most innovative ideas and effective solutions. To delve deeper into the strategies for addressing the fear of failure at an organizational level and unlocking the full potential of your workforce, continue reading.

1. View failure as a part of the learning process, not a final verdict

When you see failure as a stepping stone to improvement, you’re less likely to be paralyzed by the fear of it. This mindset allows you to experiment, learn, and adapt, ultimately helping

2. Acknowledge that fear of failure is a natural human response

Recognizing that everyone experiences fear allows you to approach it with less judgment. By understanding the specific fears that hold you back, you can develop strategies to mitigate them and move forward despite the possibility of failure.

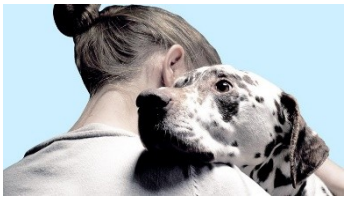
Read: Fear factor: Overcoming human barriers to innovation

3. Confront the fear of failure by recognizing that it's often rooted in the fear of death

Living fully means accepting the possibility of setbacks. By acknowledging your mortality, you can gain perspective on the importance of taking risks and pursuing your goals, even in the face of potential failure. This helps overcome the paralyzing fear that keeps people stuck.

Read: Author Talks: How to conquer fear, prepare for death, and embrace your power

4. Create an environment where it is safe to admit to mistakes



When a group or organization accepts failure as a learning tool, people are more willing to try new things. This allows for increased learning and innovation and helps avoid stagnation.

Read: What is psychological safety?

5. Use failure as a tool to refine your ambitions

Ambition that is constantly crippled by the fear of failure will never reach its full potential. By accepting and learning from failure, you can better hone your ambitions and pursue them more effectively.

Read: Author Talks: Nicolai Tillisch on how to frame ambition (and not let it frame you)

PART 5

How to talk to your boss about career development

In our previous session, we explored how embracing failure can pave the way for innovation and growth. Today, we confront a different challenge: the often-intimidating conversation about career growth. Many see this as a risky exchange, but it shouldn't be. Just as a distorted signal leads to miscommunication, fear and uncertainty can derail your career aspirations. We'll dismantle those barriers and equip you with the insights to communicate with your boss strategically and confidently.

The prospect of discussing career advancement with your manager can often feel like navigating a minefield. That knot of apprehension in your stomach? It's a common experience. But what if this perceived 'intimidating' conversation could be transformed into a powerful catalyst for your growth? The key lies in a fundamental shift: reframing your perception of feedback.

As McKinsey's Joe Ngai points out, "I remember reading my feedback and thinking, 'Wow, these are angles I've never considered before.' When leaders talk about feedback being a gift, they're right—you just need to be open to receiving it."

This 'gift' of feedback, when embraced, becomes a crucial compass, guiding you toward your professional aspirations. It's not about passively accepting criticism; it's about actively extracting valuable data to refine your approach and accelerate your trajectory. Check out these insights for actionable techniques to not only prepare for these crucial conversations, but to orchestrate them.

1. Prepare specific examples of your accomplishments

When discussing your career with your boss, don't rely on vague aspirations. Providing concrete evidence of your contributions and how they support your desired path demonstrates confidence and clarity, making it easier to have a productive conversation.

Read: My Rookie Moment: The tough stuff

2. Practice articulating your career goals and contributions in a clear and concise manner

Being able to confidently communicate your aspirations, especially when caught off guard, demonstrates preparedness and professionalism. Rehearsing key points ensures you can articulate your value effectively, regardless of the circumstances.

Read: How to speak confidently when you're put on

3. Understand your organization’s priorities

By demonstrating that your growth aligns with the company’s goals, you’ll show your boss that you’re invested in their success as well as your own. This approach fosters a collaborative conversation and increases the likelihood of a positive outcome.

Read: **Why so many bad bosses still rise to the top**

4. Ensure that your communication leaves no room for misinterpretation

Vague requests or unclear expectations can lead to misunderstandings. By being precise about your goals and needs, you minimize ambiguity and ensure that your boss understands your career aspirations.

Read: **Am I making myself clear?**

5. Don’t be afraid to voice your career aspirations and needs, even if it feels uncomfortable

“Unmuting” yourself means speaking up and advocating for your own growth. By confidently expressing your desires, you create opportunities for advancement and ensure that your career progresses in a direction that aligns with your goals.

Read: **The magic of unmuting yourself**

PART 6

How to get unstuck through deliberate decision-making

In our previous session, we explored how open communication can unlock career advancement. Today, in this sixth and final lesson, we'll tackle the pervasive challenge of indecision. Just as a hesitant step can disrupt the flow of a dance, indecision can disrupt the momentum of progress, both personally and professionally. Here's how you can break free from the inertia.

We've all been there: we have a decision to make but can't move forward for a variety of reasons. While personal indecision can be a source of stress, its impact in a business setting is magnified exponentially, with real financial and strategic consequences. Consider this: Managers at a typical Fortune 500 company may waste more than 500,000 days a year—equivalent to about $250 million in annual wages—on ineffective decision-making, write McKinsey's Aaron De Smet, Gregor Jost, and Leigh Weiss.

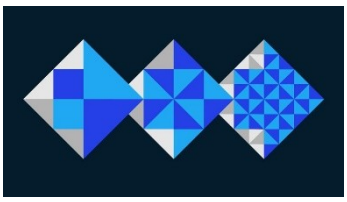
The complexities inherent in organizational decision-making, from navigating diverse stakeholder interests to analyzing vast amounts of data, can easily lead to bottlenecks and missed opportunities. But the question remains: how can leaders transform this landscape, optimize the decision-making process, and reclaim those wasted resources? How can we move from a culture of hesitation to one of decisive action?

Read on to refine your decision-making framework, foster a more agile and responsive organizational culture, and lead more effectively in an increasingly complex business environment.

1. Understand that decision-making is a process

When stuck, people often avoid making choices. By recognizing that decision-making involves a series of steps, including gathering information and weighing potential outcomes, you can approach it with a more structured and less overwhelming mindset.

2. Clearly define the decision you need to make as well as the desired outcome



Feeling stuck often arises from a lack of clarity. By precisely identifying the problem and what you hope to achieve, you can focus your decision-making process and avoid getting lost in irrelevant details, leading to a more efficient and effective resolution.

Read: Three keys to faster, better decisions

3. Prioritize decisions based on urgency and impact

In a fast-paced environment, the feeling of being overwhelmed can lead to inaction. By focusing on the most pressing and impactful decisions, you can break through the clutter and make progress, even in the face of urgency.

Read: Decision making in the age of urgency

4. Structure meetings with clear agendas

Unproductive meetings can lead to decision paralysis. By creating a focused environment for decision-making, you can avoid wasting time and ensure that choices are made efficiently, helping you move forward.

Read: To unlock better decision making, plan better meetings

5. Delegate effectively

Effective delegation means clearly defining the decision and its scope, matching it to the right person with sufficient authority, and establishing clear communication. It's about empowering your team through trust and defined accountability, not just offloading work.

Read: Decision making in your organization: Cutting through the clutter

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PART 7

Now that you've completed "The McKinsey Publishing Guide to getting unstuck," test what you've learned with our six-question quiz—one for each email in the guide—starting with the one below. If you get any answers wrong, simply follow the article links to brush up on the material.

Innovation inertia

Which of the following is MOST likely to stifle team creativity and make individuals feel stuck?

a) Encouraging open communication, even when it challenges existing norms.

b) Strict adherence to standardized operating procedures.

c) Providing resources and time for experimentation within defined parameters.